DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 234 388 CS 207 702

AUTHOR Tchudi, Stephen N.
TITLE Literature and Reading as Liberal Arts.
PUB DATE 7 Apr 83
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Spring Meeting of the Oklahoma Association of Teachers of English (Oklahoma City, OK, April 7, 1983).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *English Curriculum; Higher Education; *Liberal Arts; *Literature Appreciation; *Reading Attitudes; Reading Instruction; *Reading Programs; Secondary Education; Teacher Role; Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

Although literature and reading are considered liberal arts, it would seem that teachers of English and reading have been anything but "liberal" in their treatment of books and reading. By and large, teachers at all levels have failed to capitalize on the enormous potential of reading to make a significant difference in the lives of students. By adopting three guidelines, teachers can restore or revitalize literature and reading as genuine liberal arts. The first is that literature and reading are experiential. One learns both to read and to enjoy and appreciate literature by reading. Second, English teachers must broaden the dimensions of literature and reading. Literature and reading materials can be extended in ways conveniently summarized by the "three multis": multicultural, multidisciplinary, and multimedia. Third, reading and literature programs should be developmental. A reading and literature curriculum should mesh with the students' growing emotional, psychological, and linguistic needs and interests. (HOD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED234388

LITERATURE AND READING AS LIBERAL ARTS

Stephen N. Tchudi

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Stephen N. Tchudi

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS 207702

LITERATURE AND READING AS LIBERAL ARTS

Stephen N. Tchudi

Michigan State University

I would like to begin this essay by borrowing one of the great beginnings in literature:

"My father's family name being Pirrip, and my Christian name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Pip. So, I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip."

Virtually every English teacher will recognize that passage--most will have taught it--the opening sentences of Charles Dickens' GREAT EXPECTATIONS. Those sentences create the image of a confident and sure narrator. Although the reader has no idea of who Pip is or what is to or has befallen him, one's confidence in him is established by his assertion of identity through his name: "So I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip." (Of course, Dickens' use of first person narrative helps build our confidence in Pip, since, unless the author commits the sin of literary sins and kills off the narratore, we know that Pip will be around at the finish, alive, if not kicking.)

But there's more to that beginning. In the next paragraph Pip describes his "first most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things," an impression gained "on a memorable raw afternoon towards evening" in a church graveyard. In a sentence that must be the envy of present day

sentence-combining advocates, Pip explains:

"At such a time I found out for certain, that this bleak place overgrown with nettles was the churchyard; and that Philip Pirrip, late of this parish, and also Georgiana wife of the above, were dead and buried; and that Alexander, Bartholomew, Abraham, Tobias, and Roger, infant children of the aforesaid, were also dead and buried; and that the dark flat wilderness beyond the churchyard, intersected with dykes and mounds and gates, with scattered cattle feeding on it, was the marshes; and that the low leaden line beyond was the river; and that the distant savage lair from which the wind was rushing, was the sea; and that the small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all and beginning to cry, was Pip."

That is a remarkable sentence for its compression, its impression of gloom and terror, and its semantic shift from landscape to personal identity. It returns the focus Pip, tiny, alone, and "afraid of it all"--"it," in this instance, referring more to life itself than the bleak landscape of southeastern England.

At this point in GREAT EXPECTATIONS, not a word has been spoken. When the first lines of dialogue appear, they're enough to shake one's recently-established confidence in the ability of the narrator to make it further in life itself:

"'Hold your noise!' cried a terrible voice, as a man started up from among the graves at the side of the church porch. 'Keep still, you little devil, or I'll cut your throat.'"

That is life and death writing, better literature by far than the pseudo-dramas we see in so much contemporary fiction

and in its model, contemporary television. That is literature that grabs one by the shirt or throat (or both) and says, "Keep on reading; this is important!"

I had not read GREAT EXPECTATIONS for almost twenty years, in fact, since I had last taught it to a group of ninth grade students at Chicago Kelvyn Park High School. However, I rediscovered it a summer ago when I was in England leading a study group of American teachers and simultaneously immersing myself in British literture. This opening from Dickens caught my eye because in the study group the week before, we had heard David Holbrook, poet and educator from Cambridge University, tell us that "Literture is existential." Summarizing the arguments presented in his new book, ENGLISH FOR HUMANITY (Atlantic City: NFER Press, 1981), Holbrook explained that all literature raises existential questions: "What is the meaning of life?" "What am I doing here?" In the opening of GREAT EXPECTATIONS, Pip is raising those same two questions, and Dickens devotes the rest of the novel answering them.

David Holbrook's "existential" definition also reminded me of a classic justification for teaching English offered by Benjamin DeMott at the Dartmouth Seminar:

"English . . . is about my distinctness and the distinctness of other human beings. . . . (The English classroom) is the place--there is no other in most schools--the place where in the chief matters of concern are particulars of humanness--individual human feeling, human response and human time, as these can be known through the writen expression (at many literary levels) of men living and dead, and as they can be discovered by student writers seeking through words to name

and compose and grasp their own experience." (RESPONSE TO LITERATURE, ed. James Squire. Urbana: NCTE, 1968, p. 36)

My title, "English and Reading as Liberal Arts," echoes both Holbrook and DeMott. To some it may seem a truism: Of course literature and reading are liberal arts, if by "liberal arts" we mean studies that are a broad part of enculturation, not taught solely or primarily for their practical ends. In college, literature is always taught in colleges of arts and letters, and in the schools, literature and reading are seen as a central part of general, not vocational education.

At the same time, it seems to me that teachers of English and reading have been anything but "liberal" in their treatment of books and reading. I suspect that many graduates of American schools and colleges would be astonished at the view that literature and reading are liberal and humane arts. For many of them, "reading" consisted of drills, skills, and comprehension tests, and literature study offered a higher order version of the same: mastery and testing of names, dates, terminology, and concepts.

A few years ago I stumbled across a book that would give any teacher who is an advocate of "liberal arts" education as bad a case of shivers as Pip in the churchyard. Its title is CATCHING UP (New York: Mari Evans, 1978); its author is Charles Veley, a professor of the humanities at Johns Hopkins. The aim of the book, Veley explains, is to help people "catch up" and satisfy their need to feel educated. He argues that too many people are out of cocktail party conversations because they never got what passes for a solid education in the humanities. However, the professor explains, "There's no need to plow

through thousands of pages of reference works, unless one wants to get really immersed in a subject. For the comparisons and analogies we all like to make in our everyday talk, a knowledge of a few best things . . . will be enough."

His book, then, is a modest encyclopaedia of traditional cultural wisdom and accepted critical thought. "Two novelists one ought to know are Jane Austen and Henry James," Veley claims. "Why? To know civilized sensitivity and irony." He does not explain what civilized sensitivity and irony are; nor does he recommend that one actually read the works of Austen and James to discover those abstractions for himself or herself. For Charles Veley, learning the cultural gossip substitutes for actually reading the literature.

CATCHING UP is free with advice on "things not to bother with." Veley suggests that the reader ignore Herman Melville ("MOBY DICK is one of the great American novels nobody reads."), Charles Dickens ("Nowadays his books aren't talked about much outside the academic world, where they have time for him."), and Edgar Allan Poe ("Nobody takes Poe seriously, any more than they did last century when he showed up for a West Point morning inspection stark naked.").

One is tempted to dismiss Veley as a philistine, but as I examined his book, I realized that he is, in fact, speaking to the perceptions, worries, and concerns of a vast majority of school and college graduates, for whom the experience of literature was anything but humanizing and liberal. He is speaking to generations of students who read but did not understand or appreciate the canon of classical authors--including Melville, Dickens, Poe, Austen, and James--authors

presented as string of literary figures declared great by professor or teacher, but whose literary power was either presented prematurely or buried under instructional apparatus.

I'm not one of those who delights in badmouthing the schools and teachers over an alleged decline in the quality of education. But I believe that teachers of reading and literature at all levels have, by and large, failed to capitalize on the enormous potential of reading to make a significant difference in the lives of students. That's why a person like Charles Veley can get his silly book published.

G. Robert Carlsen once commented on fears of a "decline" of literature in this country:

"Every once in a while groups of self-appointed intellectuals get themselves up tight about the status of literature and the status of reading in the culture. They feel that something must be done to defend a fragile flower agains the trampling of barbaric boots. Really this seems nonsense to me. Literature is not so delicate that it needs any special protection. . . Nor is reading. . . . We are basically literature-creating and literature consuming animals." ("Literature IS," THE ENGLISH JOURNAL, February 1974, p. 23)

I think that Carlsen is essentially right, that literature and reading are not in need of defense because they are naturally appealing to people. It is clear that despite the onslaught of bad media and bad commercial books in our time, and despite the best (or worst) efforts of English teachers, people do continue to read (though not in large enough numbers to let our profession rest easy). However, I believe that over the period reading and literature in English have been taught

in the schools (reading, for about three hundred years, literature for a little over one hundred), teachers have generally failed to take advantage of the natural appeal of books and reading, and they have complexified rather than simplified literature for their students. If literature and reading are to be not just school subjects, but a significant part of liberal arts culture, teachers have to change some of their practices. In the remainder of this essay I want to discuss three central criteria through which we can restore, or rather, establish, literature and reading as genuine liberal arts.

1. LITERATURE AND READING ARE EXPERIENTIAL

The reader will have noted that I have not made a distinction between "literature" and "reading" thus far. Nor will I, since both seem to me a part of a continuum, and their separation in the schools has led to an unfortunate fragmentation in the curriculum, particularly in the establishment of certified reading "specialists" who operate independently of English teachers.

More important, most of the accepted research and theory on reading and literature points to a common "experiential" learning mechanism for both. One learns to read by reading; one learns to enjoy and appreciate literature by doing so. The similarities have been masked by the mushrooming of skills instruction in reading at the elementary and secondary levels and by the propensity of college professors to teach their research interests, not literature.

Writing in PHI DELTA KAPPAN, Beecher Harris once proposed "that we stop 'teaching reading' . . . and as a consequence

(abandon) the complex that has grown up around it." ("Helping to Read: A Proposal," May 1969.) Harris argued that given opportunity to examine and enjoy books, and placed in an environment where they are read to often and see adults who regard books as important, most children will learn to read on their own.

James Moffett is not quite so radical in his STUDENT-CENTERED LANGUAGE ARTS CURRICULUM (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968 and other editions), but suggests that the most essential reading "skill"--recognizing sound/symbol relations (phonics)--can be taught in as short a period as six months. After that, Moffett contends, most of what are taught as reading skills are essentially perceptual and thinking skills, learned through experience, not instruction.

One can go 'round and 'round in the debates over learning to read "on one's own," but it is evident in the schools that reading instruction--including phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and even spelling--stands in the way of experiencing books for many children. By the time "instruction" is over with, there is little time to sit down and enjoy a good book.

As I have implied, much the same practice has interfered with literature instruction at the secondary and college levels. In their zeal to enculturate, teachers and professors have buried literature under critical analysis and apparatus. I suspect Beecher Harris would advise them, "Stop teaching literature. Abandon the complex that has grown up around it. Put secondary and college students in an environment where good books are available and let them read."

(Aside and news item: At this moment, colleges and universities all over the country are thinking about having all students buy personal computers when they enroll as freshmen, with the charges prorated over four years at approximately $500 per year. I wonder what would happen if the colleges had students invest a similar amount in self-selected reading of good books?)

In her classic LITERATURE AS EXPLORATION (1938 and other editions), Louise Rosenblatt reminded us that literature is a "performing art." Literature performs for us, but we also learn to "perform" on it, becoming more and more skilled at analysis and interpretation. That peformance, however, is not learned through studying a professor's lecture notes or through writing of research papers on obscure literary topics.

Geoffrey Summerfield also uses the metaphor of literature as drama to suggest a redefinition of the teacher's role:

"If the text is a play, then the teacher's role is closest to that of a director in a theater, and, ideally, all work on the text will be directed to a hypothetical, or actual, performance of the text, to bring it to dramatic realization." ("Literature Teaching and Some of Our Responsibilities," in NEW ESSAYS IN THE TEACHING OF LITERATURE, ed. David Mallick, Peter Moss, and Ian Hansen. Norwood, South Australia: Australian Association for the teaching of English, 1982.)

Summerfield says that he spends his time as a teacher of literature simply trying to make/force/cajole his students into making contact with literary texts. If they react and respond, he feels, their powers of evaluation and analysis will be increased concomitantly.

2. ENGLISH TEACHERS MUST BROADEN THE DIMENSIONS OF LITERATRE AND READING

Helping students make contact with literature is made considerably easier if we can extend what we have traditionally meant by "literature." Literature means more than the canon of great works as presented in the conventional plump anthology. It can, in fact, be described broadly as anything in print (and language not in print) that results in a significant engagement between the student and text. Although the paperback revolution of the past twenty years has made low-cost literature of an incredible variety available, in the schools and colleges teachers and professors largely cling to a few set pieces.

Literature and reading materials can be extended in ways conveniently summarized by "the three multi's":

MULTICULTURAL. In the early 1970's, there was awareness in our profession of the need to add multicultural literature to the curriculum. Black and ethnic minority literature courses were established and proved to be popular. Yet, a decade later, many of those courses have disappeared, and, even worse, multicultural literature has not been infused into all English courses; we are still essentially teaching the literature of white America and white Great Britain. Space does not permit me to enumerate the possibilities for multicultural literature, but suffice it to say I believe the curriculum needs to be expanded dramatically to include literature describing the experiences of the full range and variety of human beings on the globe.

MULTIDISCIPLINARY. The interest in "writing across the

curriculum" has opened the way for its counterpart, "reading across the curriculum." It is evident that "literature" in English can be successfully redefined to include quality nonfiction (and even ficton and poetry) in other disciplines: science, mathematics, history, social science. Further, bringing the literature of those disciplines into school and college English classes increases reading interest for many students. Alleged "nonreaders" in the schools are discovered to have strong reading skills when literature and reading include, say, computer magazines as well as Dickens and Hardy.

MULTIMEDIA. Throughout this century, English teachers have shown interest in new media. IN the 1920s and '30s THE ENGLISH JOURNAL was filled with articles about radio and "photoplay" appreciation. In the late sixties and early seventies, many spoke, wrote, and talked about "media literacy." And in the eighties, everyone in education, including the English faculty, is interested in "computer literacy." Yet historically our interest in new media has been fleeting, and as enthusiasm wanes, one finds the traditional canon of British and American literature firmly in place.

In some respects, the return to literature has been natural--even healthy. I hope that when the last Apple and Atari have burned out in school computer rooms, someone on the English faculty will note that good reading is still an important part of the curriculum. There is also a strong element of faddishness about new media, as schools go on hardware buying sprees without much thought for what the hardware is good for. Still, it is clear that English has not made its peace with twentieth century media and technology.

The problem, I believe, is that we have treated new media rather as if they were "literary" objects, with rhetorics and "grammars" to be analyzed, rather than as forms of human experience in language. Instead of teaching about the media, I think we must emphasize using them as an integral, natural part of a classroom where--to paraphrase DeMott--language and humanness are the central concerns. When the media are treated this way, they cease being the rivals of print and simply become tools in the English teacher's attempt to broaden the base of literacy and to extend the dimensions of "literature" in the classroom.

3. READING/LITERATURE PROGRAMS SHOULD BE DEVELOPMENTAL

At this point, some readers may feel that in my zeal to extend the literature/reading curriculum and to base it in actual experience, I have utterly ignored and discarded some of the best parts of our traditions. "After all," the argument may run, "there are certain good books that all students should read. A curriculum based solely on student interests and perceived needs and based on the premise that literature is anything from television to international science journals is no curriculum at all." I understand that concern and want to address it, borrowing from J. W. Patrick Creber, who, in SENSE AND SENSITIVITY (London: University of London, 1965), argued that English teachers:

"cannot accept any . . . dichotomy between the interests of the pupil and the interests of the subject. Such a distinction seems based on the false premise that the two are mutually exclusive or radically opposed. On the contrary, that method which is of greatest benefit to the child seems to be

precisely the method which makes for the greatest vitality and sensitivity of language."

As I read him, Creber is saying that our "disciplines" do reflect human needs (though that is sometimes forgotten in universities, where scholars pursue knowledge for its own sake). The classic books--GREAT EXPECTATIONS, for example--are perfectly capable of holding their own with modern readers if presented at an appropriate time in those readers' intellectual and emotional development. I must now confess that I had ignored GREAT EXPECTATIONS for twenty years because my teaching experience with the book had been, in a word, dreadful. I had tried to force the book onto a group of thirteen and fourteen year old city kids of average skills and average interests, and they fought me every inch of the way. GREAT EXPECTATIONS is a good book for some students at some stage in their high school careers. It's an even better book for many college-age students and adults. But as Creber says, the needs of the students and the discipline must coincide. For too long, English teachers and professors have let the structure of knowledge of the discipline dictate what students read and when.

It is possible to visualize a reading/literature curriculum in which students' growing emotional, psychological, and linguistic needs and intersts mesh with the reading they are offered. A sample of such a curriculum is shown in the insert.

<Place "Model Curriculum" page about here.>

To derive this curriculum, I began by borrowing freely from Robert Carlsen's model of stages of growth in literature

222

Table 1. *A Model Curriculum for English*

	UNITS/TOPICS/COURSES	READING	COMPOSITION
ELEMENTARY YEARS	A full range of experiences make up the "curriculum" of the school. Subjects for language work range from field trips to personal experiences to school subjects.	Wide reading and use of print and non-print media. Free reading, picture books, being read to, listening to recorded literature. Informal book talks with teachers or librarians.	Equally free writing, storytelling, sharing show and tell. Playing language games. Giving dictation. Improvised drama, charades, pantomime.
JUNIOR HIGH MIDDLE SCHOOLS	Topics: *The World Around Us, Sounds and Sights, Fire and Ice, Snakes, Hunting, Our Town, Sports Animals, Faraway Places, Travel, Truth Is Stranger Than Fiction.*	Fiction and nonfiction dealing with the natural world, with an emphasis on the exciting and adventuresome, as well as things close to home.	Sensory writing, writing about observations, haiku poetry, personal narratives, keeping diaries.
A. *Vicarious Experience*			
B. *Fantasy Adventure*	*High Adventure, Romance, Survival, The Supernatural, Unknown Worlds, Detectives, Science Fiction, Ghouls and Goblins.*	Much action-packed fiction. Sci fi, detectives, mystery, adventure, horror. Hardy Boys stories, Nancy Drew, Alfred Hitchcock.	Writing of the same—tales of adventure, mystery, horror, intrigue. Improvised and scripted drama of horror, adventure, romance. Roleplaying: "If I were. . . ."
C. *Seeing Oneself*	*Who Am I?, Coming of Age, Loneliness, Dreams and Visions, Autobiographies, Personal Puzzles and Problems.*	All genres: poetry, prose, essays, films, and video dealing with identity. Especially stories by and about young people.	Personal and introspective writing: journals, diaries, personal narratives, contemplative poetry, personal poetry, values clarifying roleplay.
SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL	*Conflicts, Family Relationships, Rebellion, Friends and Enemies, Youth and Age, Making Connections with Others.*	Increasing use of adult as well as young adult literature. Literary discussion focuses on characters and their interaction. While some books describe peer problems, emphasis shifts toward adult relationships.	Introspective writing, with an increased emphasis on sharing thoughts in public. Dramatic improvisations on human problems. Conscious effort to improve group discussion skills.
A. *Human Relationships*			
B. *Expanding Consciousness*	*Cities in Decay, Man and Nature, Politics, Minorities, Schooling, Death and Dying, Hero/Anti-Hero, Might and Right, Future Shock, Utopian Visions, Prophecy.*	At this point the full range of literature—juvenile and adult—is available to students. Many opportunities exist for the teacher to move beyond "pure" literature into magazines, newspapers, and the like.	While private and personal writing remain important, students can move into a full range of public discourse, including creative essays, formal letters, discussion, debate, analysis.
C. *Learning and Knowing*	Issues, problems, moral concerns. Plus increasing connections with exploring and knowing in other disciplines; e.g., chemistry, anthropology, physics.	The full resources of the library should be made available. In addition, students can learn to "read" and gain information through media, interviews, research, and experimentation.	"Research" can be written in many forms: essay, term paper, poem, story, drama. The full range should be explored.
D. *Aesthetic Experience*	*Civil War Literature, The Literature of the Twenties, The American Revolution, Ethnic Literature, Literature of East and West.*	As appropriate to the subject, including contemporary and classic fiction and nonfiction, media resources, magazines and journal articles, elementary critical articles. Discussion begins with exploration of the text and the reader's responses, then moves toward informal critical analysis. The connections between personal response and objective criticism are explored in depth.	The focus of composition will naturally tend to emphasize the analytical and critical—writing about literature. However, the thrust toward personal, introspective, and creative writing can and should continue, lest the program become strictly "academic." Further, the students' own writing is appropriately subject to more formal critical analysis. Drama in English will increasingly focus on presentation, of student writing as well as literature, through readers' theatre, plays, etc.
History/Culture			
Genre	*Folklore, Mythology, Science Fiction, The Lyric, Contemporary Poetry, Classic Plays, The Western, The Spy Novel, Television Novels.*		
Theme	*Existentialism, Politics in Literature, Frontiers, Courage, The Young Person in Literature, American Myths and Dreams.*		

223

Stephen Judy, THE ABCs of LITERACY (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1980).

("Literature IS," previously cited.) Carlsen sees students as growing gradually from "unconscious delight" with books to advanced stages that involve aesthetic and critical examination. These stages come about naturally, he suggests, as students become more mature. (His model also shows some striking similarities to the developmental work of Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky and others, giving it a firm foundation in psychology as well as literature.) The "stages" must, of course, be treated very cautiously and non-dogmatically, but they provide a way to cluster themes, issues, topics, readings, and writings. You'll note that this curriculum leaves ample room for traditional literary concerns and the teaching of British and American literature, but it invites inclusion of multidisciplinary, multicultural, and multimedia materials as well.

This curriculum is intended as model for the development of curricula; it would be quite in opposition to my own philosophy and Creber's or Carlsen's principles to force it onto any school system. The process by which schools can create their own developmental curricula is described in considerably more detail in my ABCs OF LITERACY (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

As we move in to the middle 1980s (and as books with THE NINETIES in their titles start to appear on the shelves), I think the creation and refinement of developmental literature/reading curricla needs to be a high priority for our profession. It may be that in working toward such curricula the profession can solve one of its oldest and most nagging problems: the integration of the "tripod" elements of language,

composition, and literature. The model curriculum I have outlined treats young people's writing as a form of literature, to be read and appreciated by students just as they read and appreciate the works of "professional" and classic authors. In that way the curriculum comes full circle, with literature and reading providing fodder for discussion and writing, and with the language that students produce becoming part of the literature of the class itself.

If that happens, we will have not only established reading and literature as liberal arts, but made composition and language part of the liberal arts tradition as well. I think there may be no greater expectation for our profession.